

Ask a Master Gardener

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In the Nick of Time

Q. Being a cook, and lover of all things food related, the last thing that occurs to me during the holidays is what flower arrangement to put on the dining table or in the entrance hall. What can I do that will be easy and quick? Thank you, Merry (no kidding)

A. The first rule for a seated affair is to be certain the arrangement is low enough that people can talk easily without craning their necks to see each other across the table. It's not amusing to be conversing with your favorite niece through a forest. If you're hosting a buffet meal the arrangement can be as tall and as wide as you desire. Well, don't let the long stems dip into the gravy. It's grand and joyous if branches touch the chandelier at a stand up gathering.

Anything green that's in your yard is fair game for indoor use. If you have good friends who will let you trim some magnolia, holly, and conifers such as pine, cedar and hemlock, you are in luck. On your last trip to the grocery peruse the cut flower stand. The standard red and white blooms will certainly be useful. Any flower and any size.

This close to the day you just buy what's remaining. If everything red and white has vanished, don't fret. After you've gotten all the fresh greenery arranged, browse your tree and use a few of your newest and better looking ornaments in place of flowers. That wonderful invention, wired ribbon, can be furled and twirled throughout your creation.

Look in your cabinets for the lowest bowl or container you have. If they are all tallish you will have to be careful to keep the final product as low as you can. When the weather is again pretty and you are whiling away an afternoon in the shops look for a low rimmed bowl for your next seated party. But, back to the project at hand which is best accomplished in the carport or garage. Your trimmings can fall to the floor and more easily swept away.

If you have a product called "oasis" you are ahead of the game. This is a foam-like substance which holds water well. There is a more plastic brighter green stuff which is used for plastic or "silk flowers". Please do not confuse the two. Cram the oasis well down in your pot and soak with water for a few hours. Your greens will last longer than you will!

Use the largest and sturdiest leaves as a base. For example, arrange magnolia leaves and/or short branches at the bottom. Then build up your creation with the lighter appearing cedar or small holly. Intersperse with clusters of like flowers, such as five white roses together and three red ones in another spot. Your colors will make more of an impact if they are in groups.

If you are fortunate enough to have a proper container that doesn't require oasis, be sure to check the water level daily. Even cut stems can drink inches and you want them to last as long as possible. New Year's Day can see that identical arrangement on your table minus the red. Toss those out with the torn packaging.

For your foyer table or the living room use the rest of your greens, being sure to make the size fit the space. Again you don't want guests dodging or tangling in branches as they remove coats. Using the leftover cuttings creates a note of holiday cheer. A bit of red holly berries among the greens is perfect.

Merry, you mentioned you are not a gardener. Camellias are the plant for you! Carefree and prolific bloomers at just this time of year. A bowl filled with them reminds us Southerners of grandmothers' holiday tables. They are in bloom from November through February and are certainly appropriate for the holiday time. Many gardeners plant red, rich pink and white ones. There are several candy striped in red and white.

Camellia bushes grow to about six to eight feet tall and make a gorgeous show in winter. Take note of their size and plant them away from structures so they can receive light on all sides and present you with blooms galore. They will bloom for you the first year so plant one or two and forgo that trip to the store for cut flowers. You will have some just steps away.

For more information or answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, or email at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.